

Anna Mahler, Her Work

Reflections on Anna Mahler's Oeuvre by Ernst H. Gombrich
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Writing an introduction to a book designed to show the richness and variety of an artistic oeuvre one cannot but reflect on the uses and limits of words. It is often said that works of art cannot be translated into words, but this assertion is both commonplace and empty. A pebble cannot be translated either, nor can it ever be fully described. Any attempt to convey to other a sense impression, a feeling or a physical reaction soon brings us up against the limits of language. And yet we know that words have their uses. We employ them to name, to categorize, to indicate contexts and without these aids we could never make sense of what we experience. No sensation and no image ever communicates itself to a mind entirely unprepared, and no work of art could affect us if we encountered it totally out of context. Contexts, of course, are of different kinds. There are images which embody symbols or references we must know in order to respond. In Anna Mahler's oeuvre such works are rare, but they are not entirely absent. Sparing as she is with titles and comment she has explained the figure of Plate 103 as a 'design for the entrance of a wing'. It is a moving invention which adds to the significance of the form – not to speak of the obvious cultural context in which we all have learned of angels and of cemeteries. Nor would anyone see her Tower of Masks (63-71) as we do, if he had never heard of the masks worn on the ancient stage. Even portraits are inevitably given another dimension if we can name the sitter and know more about him or her. Anna Mahler's portrait of Arnold Schoenberg in his last illness (85) is a case in point and so is her head of Alban Berg in his prime (102). Not that such knowledge distracts from our response to what is called the language of forms, it really makes us doubly responsive.

Even so this kind of eternal pointer is rarely important for the appreciation of her work. The context for which we must be prepared is the traditional language of sculpture, the sculpture that derives its meaning and power from the response we feel as human beings to the state and character of human bodies. Language is indeed poor when it comes to describing and communicating such deep-rooted sensations. We react instinctively to images of bodies in repose and in movement, to their tenseness or relaxation, their angularity or roundedness, much as we react to the serenity or agony written on a human face. Even if there existed an elaborate technical vocabulary to label these elemental feelings its use in front of a work of sculpture would surely be redundant, if not an unpleasant intrusion.

And yet it is an illusion to think that even such works which are free of literary or historical associations can speak to us without any context altogether. Whatever purists may say, the information we receive from the critic, the historian or the publisher contributes to the experience we have in front of a work of art. It matters, for instance, to learn of the range of an artist, of the choices which precede an individual creation. For what we call expression in life and in art is inseparable from such an awareness of the context of choice.

It was a happy inspiration, therefore, to open this book with views of Anna Mahler's open-air studio at Oletha Lane, Los Angeles (1,2) and thus to introduce us immediately to the range of her creativity. It must have been an impressive experience to move between these silent creations, each with a strong presence of its

own, but joined together as the thoughts of one mind. Perhaps it was even enhanced by an encounter with an unfinished work, a huge block into which life had not yet fully entered. (47) for who would not wish to look over the artist's shoulder as such works take shape?

We cannot hope ever to see the full range of Anna Mahler's work in a similar conspectus, except in photographs. Nearly all her major works dating from before the war were destroyed in an air raid when her abandoned studios in Vienna received a direct hit. The portrait heads of her many friends among musicians, artists and writers naturally remained with the sitters and often disappeared from sight. Moreover her frequent changes of domicile, from Vienna to London, then to Los Angeles, and to various places in Central Italy, have brought it about that many of her works are scattered about the globe. Thus the book in front of the reader is intended to perpetuate and to expand the experience of her sculpture garden in Los Angeles which no longer exists. In departing from a chronological order it allows the works to articulate their individuality through kinship and through contrast. In showing many of them from several aspects it attempts as far as possible to make up for the shortcoming of the camera where sculpture is concerned. The large format, finally, should help to suggest that scale that belongs to the experience of sculpture even more essentially than to that of painting.

We are fortunate, moreover, in having the artist herself as our guide. The lecture which is printed in this volume amounts to a profession of faith that cannot but add to the context in which we see this pictorial record of her work. Once our eyes are opened to her aims her strong convictions become manifest in her oeuvre.

Should the historian obtrude further? True, he can use the notes to the plates to dissolve the composition of the book and rearrange them in his mind in a historical sequence. The earliest work here illustrated is the head of the Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg (88) which dates from 1934. It shows the same assurance as does the standing nude of 1936 (16-17) that earned the Grand Prix at the Paris Expo. Among the London works of the war years there is the classically felt half-length of 1942 (13, 14) and the calm and self-contained fountain figure from the same year (22-23). Moving into the fifties we might observe in the drinking woman of 1952 (6-7) a stronger interest in the relation between the pre-shaped block and the figure which is used with expressive force in the sketch for Caryatides of 1962 (62) and the vigorous turning woman of 1963 (37-39). There is the exploration of taut angular drapery in such works as the reclining figure of 1964 (48-49) and of expressive gestures in the early seventies, as the woman covering her face with her arms of 1972 (53-55) and weeping into her hands of 1974 (36).

But there is always a danger that in thus following the convention of splitting up an artist's oeuvre into 'periods' one is setting up a false or misleading context. Anna Mahler's work did extend in range, but she never changed course. She did not reject the ideals of her youth for the sake of new experiments. Ultimately it is this unity of purpose that emerges from a search through the list for a chronological arrangement. The art historian who prides himself on being able to date any work might find it quite salutary to test himself before consulting the table of contents. Particularly the portrait heads show a continuity of standards and of insights that refute any facile idea of a 'development'.

There remains at least one wider context for the historian to explore, and one which we know from the artist's own account to be of special relevance: I refer to the relation of her oeuvre to the styles and movements of her time. This is a task the art historian should not shun, for it is his trade that is partly responsible for the misunderstandings that have crowded around this question. Art history has conditioned us to look at the buildings and images of the past in terms of style. We can tell the sequence of Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, etc. as we can recite a list of Kings or Emperors. These labels have their uses for a first orientation, but they can also become harmful if they impoverish the teeming plenitude of history to line it up on one thread of evolution. Soon this evolution is identified with progress, and artists are envisaged like members of an army on the march. The bold vanguard thrusts into the unknown, the body of the forces consolidates the conquest, and while the stragglers finally arrive, the head of the column has already moved on. It is an easy image to keep in mind, but it happens not only to be profoundly misleading, but also mischievous on the effect it can have on the public. It sets up a context in which only one question seems to matter about an artist: Where does he stand in relation to the vanguard? How 'advanced' is he (or she)? From here there is only one step up to the next anxious question: Am I allowed to like this work or would my appreciation mark me as a reactionary?

The inspiring faith in the possibility of progress which dominated the outlook of the nineteenth century became perverted into a cultural messianism in which the future counted for more than the present. In this more general meaning of the term all the great artistic movements which sprang up in the first decades

of our century may be described as futuristic. They saw their task in creating the style of the coming age. But this conception of art threatened to become self-defeating, for it prevented the consolidation of any style. There were only vanguards and no armies. A philosophy of history which critics had picked up from historians, and artists from critics, had led to a cult of change for the sake of change.

We know that Anna Mahler will have no truck with this attitude. Nobody will suspect her of having ever been out of touch with what is called the mainstream of European art. She witnessed the ferment of the expressionist revolution and the radicalism of the Bauhaus at first hand, and she, if anyone, knows about the struggles and the pride of the avant garde. How did she become immune to the false glamour of progressivist philosophies?

I believe it would be superficial, and therefore misleading, to look for an explanation on purely personal terms. The problems and difficulties which, after its initial triumphs, led to a profound crisis of Expressionism call for a more searching diagnosis. To anticipate briefly: the crisis arose from the very lack of restraint which had been the aim of these movements to achieve. It is a situation which can arise in many fields of human endeavour, but it takes on a particular character in the field of figurative art which concerns us here. The making of images has in fact always been subject to restraints and taboos. The exotic masks or folk carvings rightly admired by the Expressionists were no less bound to conventions than were the canonic works of classical art which they wished to dethrone. What are the reasons for this inherent conservatism which is particularly noticeable in the art of sculpture? I venture to suggest that it lies precisely in the ease with which an image created by human hands can assume a life and expression of its own which may or may not have been intended by its maker. In my book *Art and Illusion* I drew attention to a little treatise on physiognomics by the Swiss pedagogue Rodolphe Töpffer of 1845. Töpffer, whose humorous picture stories became the ancestors of our 'comic strips', here reports an observation which I have proposed to call Töpffer's Law. It says that any human face scrawled however clumsily will exhibit a definite expression, a definite physiognomic character. Neither the observation of nature nor a knowledge of the laws of art are needed for the human hand to make an image that impresses us as a real being. What does need skill on the other hand is to impart to this being the intended character and expressiveness. If Töpffer is right we need be less surprised at the fact that the making of images was so often hedged in by restraints and prohibitions. Whole civilisations such as the Hebrew and the Arabic world banned image-making altogether as an encroachment on the prerogative of God. Others saw to it that the craftsman followed a strict training and a strict rule in the fashioning of those sacred images which were demanded in cult and ritual. Even where these religious considerations lost their power their so-called rules of art restrained the hands of image-makers. Only on the margin of our vision, in gargoyles and grotesques, were they given the freedom to experiment with the human physiognomy without fear of censure, only caricature obtained the 'fool's licence' of distorting the human countenance for the sake of expressiveness.

Now, in abolishing the restraint imposed by the academic tradition on the serious artist, Expressionism had certainly achieved what it set out to do – it had liberated creativity and opened up a whole world of expressiveness which remained to be conquered and explored. But in a sense the conquest proved too easy. It was exciting to discover how creative and how expressive were the images made by children, the insane and the untutored. Small wonder that artists longed to become like little children, to throw away the ballast of knowledge that cramped their spontaneity and thus thwarted their creativity, but small wonder also that new questions arose about the nature of art which were not so easily answered. After all, it was not only the proverbial philistine who could respond to works in this mode with the stereotyped remark: 'any child of five could do that too.' More often than not the elaborate answers put up by critics failed to convince, because there simply was an element of truth in this claim. Having been deprived of the armature of traditional skills, art was in danger of collapsing into shapelessness.

There were some, as we know, who welcomed this collapse of the idea of art with somewhat frantic laughter. I am referring to the 'Dadaists' and other varieties of 'anti-artists'. But anti-art is only fun as long as there is an art to rebel against, and this happy situation could hardly last. Whatever art may be it cannot be the pursuit of the line of least resistance. If the pursuit of creativity as such proved easy to the point of triviality there was a need for new restraints, new difficulties even, to take the place of the old rules and skills. I believe it would be possible to write the history of twentieth-century art not in the terms of revolutions, of the overthrow of rules and traditions, but rather as the chronicle of a quest, a quest for problems worthy of the artist's mettle. Whether we think of Picasso's restless search for creative novelty or of Mondrian's self-imposed restraints, all the masters of the century in all the media may be described as knights errant in search of a challenge.

It is against this background, I believe, that the oeuvre of Anna Mahler must be seen, and once it is seen in this way it will also prove to be of its time. What greater example could there be of a quest for the line of most

resistance than the sight of a sculptress taking on the hardest stones to give shape to her creative visions on a scale more than life size?

Anna Mahler did not find her vocation all at once. She started as a student of painting, having gone to Rome to work under de Chirico. She found that she profited little from his instructions, but she used the time to good purpose, spending all available hours in the life class. She has told me that it was the encounter in Italy with such masters as Mantegna, Masaccio and Castagno which had opened her eyes. There are no masters in the whole history of painting whose work is more 'sculptural' than theirs. Held against the discipline and sheer specific gravity of their creations much of contemporary art was bound to look flimsy. No wonder she also found little satisfaction moving from teacher to teacher during her subsequent two years stay in Paris, though she does remember with gratitude the instructions of Schuchaeff. It was only after she had taken up sculpture, however, that, as she put it, she 'never looked back'. Though largely self-taught she acknowledges the advice and inspiration she received from the Austrian sculptor Fritz Wotruba, who enjoyed carving his monumental figures from hard unyielding stone.

Like other sculptors of this century Anna Mahler wishes her work to reflect the character of the chosen medium. For her deeply searching portraits she prefers to use soft clay, for here it is the task itself that offers the challenge, the task of conferring on the modelled head something of the life and individuality of the sitter without sacrificing the demands of formal discipline. With monumental sculpture she likes best to attack the stone directly, often without a preliminary sketch. The need to respect the will of the stone which should be mastered, but not denied, sets up a code of rules which differ fundamentally from work in clay or terracotta. Turning the pages of this book suffices to understand that she has not refused to profit from the movement of liberation that has taught us to find expressiveness in images remote from naturalistic forms. She can tap the mute grandeur of primitive carvings and the severity of archaic art without succumbing to mannerisms. Unlike other contemporary sculptors, however, she does not consider carving incompatible with facial expression. Perhaps no other of her works illustrates this search for physiognomic force with greater intensity than her Tower of Masks (63-71) with its sheer endless variations of human faces in movement and repose. Of necessity this was first sketched in clay. But the finished work imparts to the masks an air of finality that is truly monumental.

But though her work is expressive, it is not expressionist precisely because she has never wanted to shock through rebellious gestures. Instead she has shown the greater courage of continuing her independent quest for that perennial value of beauty to which she has paid tribute in her work and in her words. Indeed this is the point when the historian can withdraw to let the artist herself take over.